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CHICAGO (WBBM) -- U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk is returning to Capitol Hill as a member of the minority party for the first time.

WBBM's Bob Roberts reports.

Despite that, the North Shore Republican said Wednesday just before boarding his plane to Washington that he is optimistic about its possibilities.

Ethics legislation is a top priority for Kirk, who wants to see to it that any member of Congress convicted of two dozen different felonies is automatically stripped of his Congressional pension.

The measure is one already enacted into the laws of many states, Kirk said, including Illinois.

"Our state is not known as being the cleanest state in the Union, and yet this is already the law in the Land of Lincoln, and we have seen a number of legislators in our state lose their pensions after being convicted of a felony," he said.

Among those facing such penalties on the state level currently is former Gov. George Ryan, although Ryan is battling to keep that portion of his pension stemming from his service on the Kankakee County Board, the Illinois General Assembly and as lieutenant governor.

Kirk also wants expanded COBRA insurance benefits made available for life to those who want it after losing jobs.

He said he is working with U.S. Rep. Danny Davis (D-Ill.) to end federal subsidies to sugar farmers. And he wants to block the back-door insertion of pork barrel projects in spending bills, without Congressional hearings.

"The problem has been powerful chairmen inserting projects late at night, just before a bill is finalized, and going through in the dark of night," he said.

The foremost target of Kirk's wrath is the so-called "Bridge to Nowhere," which would have connected Ketchikan, Alaska, with a nearly uninhabited island. Promoters of the bridge said it would spur economic development of the island.

"It's a project that, if subjected to any amount of the light of day, would have been killed," he said.

Kirk has his own local funding priorities – the continuing clean up of Waukegan Harbor, expansion of the North Chicago Veterans Hospital and construction of the proposed Metra STAR Line, which would link O'Hare and Hoffman Estates with new trackage along I-90, and would then turn south to Joliet using existing freight railroad tracks.

Kirk said each of those projects have already withstood Congressional scrutiny.

"In the long run, projects like these, which are fully-engineered, subjected to complete scrutiny, and included in the President's budget, are the ones that are obviously good things that the federal government should do," he said.

Kirk said he sees an opportunity to forge alliances between moderate Republicans and conservative Democrats in the House.

He said, if it were to occur, it would create a block of more than 125 congressmen that would be formidable in negotiations.